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The Unknown Empress: Theodora As a Victim of Distorted Images

Recently, an American movie director, caused consternation in Argentina calling Eva Perón a combination of prostitute and saint. Evita was of humble social origins, made a scandalous career in show business, became a mistress of a strong-willed officer about 20 years her senior. She promoted, as a partner in power, her own social, political and spiritual causes. Common people adored and hated this woman, elite resented her. Her untimely death from cancer in the full flower of her mature beauty gave an ultimate tragic touch to her legend, and signified the start of the decline for her husbands' rule.

We could replace Evita's name with that of the empress Theodora (ca. 497-548), the most famous woman of the Early Byzantine period, and all ingredients of the biography and legend would remain. Surprisingly, Theodora too is still capable of arousing a passionate controversy. We have had a long tradition of attempts to replace her historical image with an idealized, uncritical glossy picture or to denigrate her utterly. In this paper I will deal with the two most important and representative recent examples of these opposing tendencies. The first one originates outside the academic world and achieves importance from the high authority of its source. The other one is an ambitious study published by an American scholar a few years ago. These contributions are also diametrically opposed on their assessment of the work of the last great historian of antiquity, Procopius of Caesarea. Every debate about Theodora necessarily turns into discussion of Procopius for natural reason that he is our main source of information of the age of Theodora and her husband, emperor Justinian. We

could even say that in the same way as Thucydides has created the Peloponnesian Wars as a historiographical construct for us, Procopius has created Justinian's era.

Let us first try to set Procopius in context of the other sources of his time. Procopius has always baffled interpreters because it seems that he has three different images of Theodora, corresponding to each of his works, a book of panegyric (*The Buildings*), a book of history (*The Wars*), and a book of slander (*The Anecdota* or so called *Secret History*).¹

In the contemporary sources we have also glimpses of the self-image which Justinian's regime tried to convey; for example explicit mentions of Theodora in legislation and in some other official settings.² The most representative of these is perhaps the dedicatory inscription of the church of St. Sergius at Constantinople which celebrates "the God-crowned Theodora whose mind is adorned with piety, whose constant toil lies in unsparring efforts to nourish the destitute".³ In addition there are also fragments of the diplomatic correspondence of the age which understandably enough, because of the nature of the genre, upheld a respectful image of the Empress.⁴

The image of a serene queen, a righteous and saintly lady of the Monophysite dissidence, is, of course, motivated by religious controversy.⁵ On the other hand, the motives for the image of the dissolute, cruel Empress, painted by Procopius in the *Anecdota* do not arise from any consideration of Christological debate. His criticism is motivated and expressed at the secular level, with reference to issues of morality and politics. The writers of the Chalcedonian leanings understandably do not have any special sympathy for Theodora. Their attitudes vary from moderately hostile to respectful. In his vehement hatred of Theodora the Procopius of

the Anecdota is, in practice, alone.

Taking his inspiration from the eschatological reflections concerning the new millennium, His Holiness Ignatius Zakka, Patriarch of Antioch and supreme head of the universal Syrian Orthodox Church, produced on February 2000 an encyclical letter for the celebration of the fifteen hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Jacob Bardaeus, founding father of the Syrian Orthodox Church and – thus are the epithets in the patriarchal letter – the righteous and God-fearing Queen Theodora. The patriarchal letter contains quite a remarkable direct intervention by a modern ecclesiastical authority in the problem of how to interpret late antique historians:

"Contemporary, reliable, and honest historians who have full knowledge of her life have provided credible accounts of her origin, early life, pure conduct and her immaculate inner self and thoughts. At the forefront of those, was the Syrian Chronicler St. John of Ephesus, who had a close relationship with her family and knew her quite well. He wrote about her childhood and her marriage to the Caesar Justinian. The latter had promised her father that he would not force her to change her faith which rejects the Council of Chalcedon and its resolutions. He delivered his promise, indeed. Her staunch enemy, who was also an enemy of truth, the Chronicler Procopius, failed to deny her the glory that she earned with her wisdom and her courage in helping her husband the Emperor Justinian. The dishonest and unjust Chronicler Procopius, tried to smear her virtuous conduct."⁶

Just some comments on this. First, this canonized story is not exactly in accord with the scholarly opinions concerning the relationship of John of Ephesus and the later Syriac tradition. The story in its developed form is not present in John. Second, I find Procopius' account more probable and easier to reconcile with the other available evidence. That is because we do not have any information besides that offered by Michael the Syrian (who lived in the 12th century) that Justinian ever served in the East (as only the Syrian tradition states).⁷ There is also the well-known law promulgated by Justin the First in order to facilitate matrimonies between senators and former actresses.⁸ This law is usually seen to be tailored to the case of Justinian and Theodora.

The second contribution which I like to deal with is the book written by Anthony Kaldellis and published in 2004 by the University of Pennsylvania Press with the title "Procopius of Caesarea. Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity". It is perhaps the most important recent contribution to the scholarship on Procopius.⁹

Kaldellis' thesis is that Procopius should be understood essentially as a philosophical critic of tyranny in specific historical context, where power takes the form of a "metaphysical" dictatorship sanctified by the official Christian ideology.¹⁰

This conception of Early Byzantine regime could be a healthy antidote to the bias which often unconsciously colors modern interpretation of the world of late antiquity. I mean by this ideas which imply that the Christian world was the necessary results of the dying ancient world or the assumption that Christianity inherited all that was essentially good in the ancient world and added to this heritage something peculiar of its own, such as philanthropy,

conscience, grace and things like that. These views may overestimate the originality of the benefits bestowed by the new religion. What is more serious is that, these views underestimate the role of violence in the transformation of the late antique world to the medieval Christian world. Late antique paganism did not wither away by natural death, it was murdered by the organized repression of a historically new phenomenon – the church-state complex.

Kaldellis quite rightly points out Procopius' humanity, which shows itself in the historian's attitude to the wars of his age. "Procopius sympathizes with all those who suffered at the hands of the kings. Procopius does not value the suffering of Romans more than that of the others."¹¹

However, there are some aspects in Kaldellis' interpretation which are not so convincing. Kaldellis takes Procopius seriously as a genuine Platonist who wrote for the Platonist audience. He would like Procopius to have been a member of the Platonist opposition circle, which is constructed like this: John Lydus – supposed close friend of Procopius – was related to Agapius, who was known as the last pupil of the great Proclus.¹² In effect, young John Lydus only attended some lectures of Agapius before being engaged in a career which was destined to bring him to the top posts in the imperial administration. John Lydus' writings reveal him as a state functionary with strong antiquarian interests but hardly a philosopher. He has strong opinions on the contending factions of the court and bureaucracy, but he was not in opposition to the regime.¹³ About Theodora Lydus had little to say, but it was only good.

The whole construction of "Procopius the Platonist" seems to me untenable on doctrinal grounds too. I do not believe that Plato's works has fundamental role in forming Procopius' opinions on tyranny. If there is Platonism in Procopius, it is in his writings only in very diluted and diffused sense. There is no evidence of the agreement of views between Procopius and real Platonists of his age. By real Platonists I mean the genuine core members of the Platonist schools. And by views I mean opinions making meaningful distinction between Platonist and others. Of course, Neoplatonist as Simplicius and Damascius are in agreement with Procopius regarding the oppressive policy of Justinian. This common adhesion to the values of toleration and freedom of the spirit sets them radically apart from the opinions of the majority of their age, but it does not make Procopius a Platonist. Procopius habit of explaining things by the intervention of evil demons is typically Christian and does not agree with the demonological doctrines of Later Neoplatonism. Christianity demonized the demons, whereas in Neoplatonism consciously evil doing demons have a very small role. Procopius' doctrine of the peculiar feminine virtues and vices, on which his view of Theodora is based, is in total contradiction to the Neoplatonist teachings of his age.¹⁴

Earlier research has found a good deal of prejudice towards lower-class upstarts and male chauvinism – and probably in that order – in Procopius' attitude to Theodora. The Secret History has accordingly been interpreted as an attempt at revenge, in which the author serves up artful stereotypes of women in the early Byzantine world. Kaldellis tries to challenge this interpretation.

".. Procopius' portrait of Theodora is still the most psychologically compelling, and one of the most vivid to survive from antiquity. Attempts to refute it invariably rely on psychological speculation, for the accusations in the Secret History have not been convinced of error and have been confirmed by other sources dealing with the same events; the facts underlying Procopius' account are confirmed by incontrovertible evidence elsewhere ... it has also been shown beyond a doubt that other sources are far less reliable on Theodora than is the Secret History.

Accusations of misogyny, furthermore, are circular and founder on Procopius' admiration for Amalasuntha. A dispassionate analysis of the evidence points to the conclusion that Theodora was in fact petty, arrogant, wrathful, unforgiving, ruthless, and willing to sacrifice everything to her personal feuds and avarice."¹⁵

Surely the portrait of Theodora drawn by Procopius is vivid, but is it really convincing? Procopius refutes himself often with his inherently absurd arguments. The Anecdota disagrees with Procopius' other works and there are many instances of internal inconsistency in the Secret History itself. Kaldellis' esoteric and allegorical method avoids these problems because it dictates, that in cases of discrepancy between the Anecdota and the other Procopian works, we should always assume that the Anecdota is speaking the truth. When Procopius' tales get too strong Kaldellis explains the problems away as ornaments of the literary surface.

Kaldellis' attempt to save Procopius from all suspicion on misogyny by resorting to the fact

that Procopius praises Amalasuntha is particularly unconvincing.¹⁶ What Procopius praises in the Gothic queen was that she was rightful, wise, and so good a woman that in her nature she was almost like a man.¹⁷ Thus the circularity of the argument seems to be on the part of Kaldellis.

There is another interesting point in Procopius' treatment of Amalasuntha and Theodora. Amalasuntha is challenged by the Gothic aristocrats who do not accept feminine rule, but she resists them bravely. Is this not analogous to the behavior of Theodora during the Nika revolt? However, for Kaldellis' the images of Amalasuntha and Theodora in Procopius' *Wars* could not be similar because the real image of Theodora should always be constructed on the basis of what the *Anecdota* tell us. Thus, according to Kaldellis, Amalasuntha is praiseworthy for Procopius but in a comparable situation Theodora illustrates feminine irrationality.

Dealing with Theodora's famous intervention to save the day for Justinian in the Nika revolt¹⁸ Kaldellis writes:

"This speech is a masterpiece of characterization, one of Procopius' best. It is completely devoid of sound advice, strategy, of argument indeed, the empress says nothing that is even remotely rational. Her speech consists entirely of a massive assertion of will. She cares only about what she will be called by others and whether she will still wear the trappings of power. Her speech in no way empowers women, as previously believed. It is instead a brilliant reflection of the character portrait of the empress contained in the *Secret History*: irrational, vindictive, and vain. The

speech expresses the raw ambition of a woman who has no conception of the dignity of political life. To have lived under her power must have been unbearably degrading." ¹⁹

Let us try to set the speech and situation in its context in Procopius' story. Each in turn, the most powerful men of the realm advise the Emperor to flee from the capital. Then the Empress makes her intervention and ideas are switched from flight to resistance and attack.

Be that as it may with the Procopius the Philosopher, but surely Procopius the Historian was a worthy and conscious successor to the classical tradition. Speeches are designed in order to make historical agents' decisions, choices, and acts rationally understandable. For Procopius the Nika revolt is an organic part of Justinian's wars, just as for Appianus the civil wars were part of the history of the Roman Wars. Belisarius' attack in the hippodrome plays the role of a decisive battle in this peculiar campaign. Undoubtedly, the speech reported by Procopius is also intended to characterize the speaker, but structurally and functionally it is a classical war-council and exhortation address. At least for me it contains an adequate analysis of the situation and a rhetorically efficient call to action. The senator Origenes, who is in the enemy camp, and Theodora are the protagonists in this context because they give their partisans appropriate advice for the occasion. The rebel party does not follow Origenes' exhortation and they are destined to defeat. On the victorious side it is Theodora who shows them how to win. Procopius may give credit to whom it belongs grudgingly, but nevertheless he does so.

The Eastern Orthodox stand against Procopius evidenced by the Lent encyclical of 2000

shows that the days when it seemed natural to think that Theodora's past as a circus artist and erotic dancer were morally detrimental to her person and historical image have not totally passed even now.²⁰ Kaldellis' attempt to resuscitate a hostile image of Theodora is not based on these lines. For him Theodora is like an evil genius of a tyrannical regime. His defense of the coherence of the Procopian corpus requires a reading in which the *Anecdota* is the key for the interpretation in order to harmonize contradictions. A higher status than commonly assumed is also conceded to Procopius' historiography – his works are "Platonic philosophy in disguise".²¹ I am not convinced that the puzzle of the three different versions of Procopius is solved in this way. Historical interpretation hardly gains much if we deny the fact that Procopius shared a lot of the prejudices of his time and instead of analyzing his view of Theodora we are actually going to subscribe to the hate-filled image of the *Anecdota*.

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¹ The best modern introduction on Theodora known to me is James A. Evans, *The Empress Theodora. Partner of Justinian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). Historians of such a caliber as Leopold von Ranke and J.B. Bury could solve the disagreement between the *Anecdota* and the other Procopian works only by assuming

the Secret History to be a forgery.

2 In *Novellae* 8.1 Justinian explicitly said that he has consulted his "august consort" on this anti-corruption law. Justinian also demands that provincial governors take an oath to her as well as him. For Theodora's influence on Justinian's legislation see Stein Ernest, *Histoire du Bas-Empire, II* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949), 464 and Honoré Tony, *Tribonian* (London: Duckworth 1978), 11-12.

3 Elizabeth K. Fowden *The Barbarian Plain*, Berkely: University of California Presss, 1999) 130 (cited here from Evans, *Theodora*, 127, n. 7). Theodora's regard for social justice is also echoed in John Lydus, *de mag.* 3.69.

4 We have some letters to Theodora from the Ostrogothic rulers of Italy (Amalasuntha, Theodahad and his queen Gudelinda) in the 10th book of Cassiodorus' *Variae* (letters X,XX,XXI,XXIII).

5 Monophysite sources are not totally free of criticism. Severus betrays his irritation in a letter from the year 537 at the fact that Theodora was ambitious enough to form her own opinions on theology, E.W. Brooks, *The sixth book of the select letters of Severus patriarch of Antioch in the Syriac version of Athanasius of Nisibis.*, vol 2 (Oxford 1903: Williams & Norgate), 195-199.

6 The whole text of the document is to be seen at the URL

<http://sor.cua.edu/Personage/PZakka1/20000212MYBurdconoTheodora.html> (checked 18th November 2008).

Theodora and Justinian also have a memorial day – 14th (Julian) / 27th (Gregorian – November) in the Orthodox Church. “Heretic” as an Orthodox saint is, at least in Russia, explained by the fiction that Theodora renounced Monophysitism. Actually, long after Theodora's death, Justinian transferred his allegiance to Monophysitism, but not, however, to the moderate Severian branch supported by Theodora, but to the Aphtartodocetist current.

7 The best treatment of Theodora in the Monophysite sources is Susan A. Harvey, “Theodora the 'Believing Queen': A Study in Syriac Historiographical Tradition”, *Hugoye. Journal of Syriac Studies*, 4:2 (2001). I am grateful to Dr. Christine Kiraz for pointing this article out to me.

8 *Codex Iust.* 5.4.23.

9 See also the review of the book in “Bryn Mawr Classical Review” 2005.10.11 (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/>), written by William Edmund Fahey.

10 In this respect the forerunner for Kaldellis is Tony Honoré, who seeks parallels between Justinian and Stalin, Honoré, *Tribonian* 28-30.

11 Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia 2004: University of Pennsylvania Press) 126-127.

12 "Lydus was probably a close friend of Procopius and one of the intended readers of the Secret History", Kaldellis, *Procopius*, 134. But this is only speculation.

13 Saffrey and Westerink have made an exhaustive study of the circle of Proclus. Their note on Agapius, however, is erroneous. Saffrey H. D and Westerink L.G, *Proclus. Théologie platonicienne, Livre I* (Paris 1968: Les Belles Lettres), xii. The passage referred to is 3.26 (not 5; there are only three books) and here Lydus says that Agapius was his teacher in Constantinople, not in Philadelphia, when at the age of 21 he moved to the imperial city.

14 For Proclus' demonology see especially *In Alc*, 67.19-73.6 and *In Remp*. 1.41.11-29. For his views on women see *In Remp*. 1.236.1-257.7.

15 Kaldellis, *Procopius*, 130. In his diatribes Kaldellis sometimes goes into issues wider than the personality of the Empress. This criticism of Belisarius leaves one speechless: "Rather than suffer such indignities, any real man would have destroyed those two monsters (i.e. Theodora and her friend Antonia, wife of Belisarius) or died trying. And this is exactly what Procopius says on the next page ...(4.40-41)", Ibid, 146.

16 Amalasuntha was daughter of Theoderic, Gothic king, who conquered Italy 488-493 with consent of Constantinople. From 526 Amalasuntha ruled Ostrogothic kingdom in name of his son. Gothic aristocracy regarded her too Roman in her habits and culture. When her son died (534) Amalasuntha took power as a ruling queen. She tried to secure her position allying with her cousin Theodahad who, however, imprisoned her and had her later killed (535). This murder offered acceptable *casus belli* for Justinian. Theoderic's and Justinian's dynasties later joined in Germanus Postumus whose parents were Matasuntha, daughter of Amalasuntha, and Germanus, nephew of Justinian.

17 Procopius, *Wars* 5 2.4.1: "Then Amalasuntha reigned, as a regent for her son, having acquired great wisdom and understanding of justice and she showed herself to be in possession of a very masculine nature".

18 Speech in Procopius, *Wars* 1.24.32-38.

19 Kaldellis, *Procopius*, 130.

20 One may think that such things like insinuations to oral and anal sex in *Anecdota* hardly upset modern Western sensibilities. Nevertheless, for example, the introduction of the work in the popular Penguin Classics series is written in the spirit of well-behaving narrow-mindedness as late as 1965. Procopius, *The Secret History* (Harmondsworth 1966: Penguin Books), reprinted 1982, see especially amusing reproach to frivolous people beyond the Channel: “Perhaps the French can appreciate the lady better than we can”, 15.

21 Kaldellis, *Procopius*, 117.